The Esthetics of Synonymy

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If our language were ideal, it would exhibit a one-to-one correspondence between thought and word. For each possible thought, there would be one (but no more than one) matching word.

Our language is not ideal. On the one hand, there are many thoughts that cannot be expressed by means of single words. For instance, the concept "the number 6 is regarded as the product of 3 and 2 rather than as the sum of 5 and 1" has no word corresponding to it. On the other hand, many thoughts can be expressed in two or more equivalent ways. Thus, one of the seasons of the year is known either as AUTUMN or as FALL, the LITTLE FINGER is also the AURICULAR FINGER or the PINKIE, and the Australian DUCKBILL may be called a PLATYPUS, ORNITHORHYNCHUS, TAMBORET, MALLANGONG, or WATER MOLE.

Equivalent words are referred to as "synonyms" and their study is one of the more interesting branches of logology. The chief concern of the logologist, perhaps, is to find synonyms that are esthetically satisfying. The task is by no means a simple one, for many are the problems encountered by the would-be synonymist. The purpose of this article is to establish some guidelines for esthetic synonymy.

Open any good dictionary, and you are confronted immediately by synonym groupings such as BREAK, BURST, CRUSH, SHATTER, SHIVER, and SMASH. The members of such a grouping have some similarity in meaning, and what dictionaries do is to explain the differences between them. It is obvious that such words are not true synonyms and that they must be rejected by the logologist in his research. Only words identical in meaning, or identical for all practical purposes, can be accepted as synonyms. This principle virtually eliminates all words labeled as synonyms in dictionaries.

More difficult to define and enforce is the distinction between synonyms and variant spellings. It is self-evident that GIRAFFE and CAMELopard are true synonyms, whereas EON and AEON are merely variant spellings of one basic word. Consider, however, the case of a crested, ploverlike bird most commonly known as the LAPWING. This bird goes by many other names as well and deciding which of them to admit to the select coterie of synonyms is a trying problem, one that no one has ever successfully solved.
Exploring the numerous designations for lapwings, we are able to eliminate some of them at sight. VANELLIUS, LOBIVANELLUS, LOBIBYX, BELONOPTERUS, HOPLOPTERUS, ZONIFER, and others are names of genera to which various specific lapwings belong, not of the birds themselves. On the other hand, more complete names such as VANELLIUS VANELLIUS, or TRINGA VANELLIUS, or VANELLIUS CRISTATUS, or VANELLIUS VULGARIS (all four of them scientific designations for the common lapwing), are names for one particular kind of lapwing only, not for lapwings in general. It is this that disqualifies them from consideration. That they are two-word names, more Latin than English, and not listed as boldface entries in any dictionary, making them distasteful to many logologists, is a strictly secondary consideration, not a decisive factor.

Many lapwings have specific popular names. Thus, there is the SOUTHERN LAPWING, also called the TERUTERO or TERUTERU (a tautonym); the SPURWING, BLACKSMITH, CROCODILE BIRD, LEECHEATER, or SPUR-WINGED PLOVER or SPUR-WINGED LAPWING; the ALARM BIRD or WATTLED LAPWING; the RED-WATTLED LAPWING; the MASKED PLOVER; and, of course, the kingpin of them all, the COMMON LAPWING or EUROPEAN LAPWING or BASTARD PLOVER or GREEN PLOVER. However, the trouble is that each of these names is a name for one particular kind of lapwing, not for the generality of lapwings, so that it is impossible to equate any of them with the general concept LAPWING, and we are obliged to discard all of them.

Every lapwing may be referred to as a PLOVER, or a CHARADRIOID, or a CHARADRIOMORPH, or a PRESSIROSTER. Unfortunately, these names are more general than is the name LAPWING, embracing other birds as well, making such names equally unacceptable as true synonyms for LAPWING.

The sportsmen of the 15th Century used numerous quaint designations for flocks of birds and for herds of animals. The proper term for a covey of lapwings was originally DECEIT. This was later corrupted into DESERT, and still later into DESSERT. However, all of these terms are terms for a group of lapwings, not for one individual lapwing. Therefore, we must resolutely reject them in our consideration of names for the lapwing.

Of somewhat anomalous status is the word HUPPE, a name for the lapwing when it appears as a charge in armorial (heraldic) bearings.

A search through obscure references uncovers the word BENNET, alleged to be another name for the pewit or lapwing. This word was confirmed in The English Dialect Dictionary by Joseph Wright (six volumes, 1898-1905).

Turning finally to synonyms and variants purported to be genuine, we quickly compile the following list of names, each of which is equated with the general concept LAPWING by at least one leading dictionary:
How shall we decide which are synonyms and which are variants? Taking the most stringent point of view, there are only three mutually independent names: LAPWING, PEWIT or TEWIT (both imitate the bird's cry and differ from each other only in one letter), and WHISTLER. All other names on the list can be related to one of these in appearance. For instance, FLOPWING is strikingly similar to LAPWING; WEEP connects with PEEWEEP, which connects with PEWEE, which connects with PEWIT; HLEAPEWINCE connects with LAEl'EWINCE, which connects with LAPPEWING, which connects with LAP­ WING; TEUCHAT connects with TUCHIT, which connects with TUIT, which connects with TEWIT; and so forth.

Furthermore, many of the names on our list are described by dictionaries as obsolete, or local, or dialectal, or provincial. The synonymist would really prefer to limit himself to standard English.

We started out with a synonym group comprised of some 75 members. After applying all sensible limitations to it, we are left with three or four words. Is this fair to the synonymist? It isn't, what is the solution? That is the question that has never satisfactorily been answered.

A much longer list of names can be assembled for another bird, the GREEN WOODPECKER, but the overall results are quite similar.

True esthetics requires an even further narrowing of admissibility standards for synonym groupings. Is it not logical, and therefore mandatory, that a synonym be spelled with exactly the same number of letters as the original word? Consider, for example, the less than uplifting 8-letter term SPITTOON. There are two synonyms for it in English, both of them also 8-letter words: CUSPIDOR and CRACHOIR. Here is the model of what a synonym group should be: standard English words, identical in meaning, clearly different from one another in appearance, spelled as single, solidly-written words, neither more general nor more specific in meaning than the original word.
found as boldface entries in dictionaries, and equal in letter length. It is synonym groups such as these that the devoted logologist seeks to collect. There are many such groups, if we but have the patience to seek them out.

A particularly horrifying disease is known, especially in its initial stages, either as LOCKJAW or as TETANUS or as TRISMUS. The eggplant is more edifyingly referred to as an AUBERGINE, or a BERENGENA, or a MELONGENA. The harvest fly, an obliging little insect, permits itself to be called a CICADA, or LOCUST, or JARFLY, or TETTIX, not to mention what are essentially variants of the first of these 6-letter names: CICALA, CICALA, and CIGALE.

New words entering our language have created a remarkable group of 7-letter designations for a Mexican now in the United States: MEXICAN, GREASER, BRACERO, CHICANO, PACHUCO, and WETBACK.

Readers are invited to join the Great Synonym Derby now in full swing, locating other like groups of truly synonymous and esthetically satisfying words.